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Spaghetti Westerns and the “afterlife” of a Hollywood genre

The Western is no longer a major genre in contemporary Hollywood cinema. How long this has been the case is the subject of some debate; there is no definitive moment at which the Western “fell” out of the mainstream. Michael Walker argues that “The Western as a genre all but disappeared around 1977,” (1996: 284), while J. Hoberman (1998: 91) proposes 1973 as the first year in which the diminished profile and more marginal popular status of Westerns could be clearly felt. Other potential candidates for such a moment might include the critical and subsequent commercial failure of *Heaven’s Gate* (Michael Cimino) after its release in 1980.

It is clear that the popular decline of the Hollywood Western has been registered in different ways at different times. It is equally clear, though, that there has been no significant or sustained return to the regular production of Westerns in Hollywood since the 1970s. This is not to claim that the genre has disappeared entirely. Westerns are still occasionally made, and characteristic images and motifs from the genre survive elsewhere, too – for example, Jim Kitses (1998:17) notes the continuing prevalence of Western iconography in the road movie. Nonetheless, in the past few decades the Western genre seems to have entered what we might call its “afterlife”: a more marginal, residual mode of generic existence in which older meanings and resonances face very different conditions of popular interest and understanding.

The Western is no longer assumed to be familiar to either Hollywood filmmakers or their audiences. There are undoubtedly exceptions in both cases, but this seems to be the prevailing view. John Anderson's remarks in an article for *Variety* about the recent version of *The Lone Ranger* (Gore Verbinski, 2013) express some aspects of this contemporary perspective:

As Verbinski puts it, making Westerns in general is 'really hard.' But so is the task of making them relevant to generations whose frame of reference doesn't include masked men, horses, shootouts at the local saloon... (Anderson 2013: 60)

The Western has come to be associated with a sense of uncertainty – uncertainty about the commercial viability of Western productions, and about contemporary audiences' capacity to understand and appreciate the Westerns that do get made. This chapter forms part of my ongoing efforts to reflect on the implications of this situation – to think about how Western movies (and their attendant themes and tropes) have functioned since the genre ceased to be a major part of mainstream American cinema and how these changed generic conditions have affected the ways in which Westerns are produced and understood.

In this chapter, I will compare the contemporary situation outlined above with another historical moment in which the conventions of the Western genre found themselves transformed by a different set of surrounding contexts: the Italian adoption of the Western in the 1960s. Both the Spaghetti Western and the afterlife of the Western can be thought of as moments of transposition, in which aspects of the Western genre have been subject to a fundamental shift

in context. In the case of Spaghetti Westerns, this shift occurred across national cinemas and film cultures, from the United States to Italy. For the various films and other works that I take to be examples of the afterlife of the Western, the transposition is across time, from a period in which the genre was a current and familiar popular form to one in which the place of Westerns in popular culture is much less prominent. I will consider the extent to which these two transpositions are comparable to each other and the ways in which works from each context reflect and respond to similar conditions. The cultural shift constituted by the Spaghetti Western can perhaps be said to anticipate aspects of the later situation, but there are also important differences, particularly in the level of assumed familiarity with the genre and its tropes.

I am conscious that framing these two contexts as moments of transposition involves implicitly positing an earlier version of the Hollywood Western as the norm or template for the genre. It is certainly important to acknowledge that there is no original or definitive version of the Western genre, no single object or feature that is being transposed in all cases. The Westerns made during the Hollywood studio era, for example, are themselves made up of an array of transposed elements, from popular literature, theatre and painting, as well as from other movie genres. Although I would argue that the proliferation of feature Westerns in Hollywood between the late 1930s and the early 1960s was a time of great richness within the genre, I have no interest in promoting any particular example from that period as the model for how Westerns should be. Indeed, the quantity of Hollywood Westerns produced in these

decades resulted in an extraordinary variety within the genre – from the subversive comedy of *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939) to the grim futility of *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943), from the vivid social renderings of John Ford to the isolated ensembles of Budd Boetticher. As Tag Gallagher (2003: 264) has pointed out, the notion of the “classic” Western as a coherent and identifiable form against which deviations can be measured is highly problematic. However, it is still legitimate to consider the ways in which movies relate to and make use of their influences and predecessors within a generic tradition. The presence of elements from earlier incarnations of the genre in very different surrounding conditions makes the Spaghetti Western and the afterlife of the Western particularly interesting contexts in which to reflect on such relationships.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are differences in each case in the generic forms and conventions that are being transposed. Crucially, the loose composite definition of the Western genre that we find at work in its afterlife has come to include the Spaghetti Western (or at least a particular view of it) quite prominently. I will return to the place of the Spaghetti Western within the afterlife of the genre at the end of this chapter.

Thinking about the Spaghetti Western and the afterlife of the Western as moments of transposition allows us to identify and examine some of the parallel ways in which the genre is treated in the two contexts. Perhaps the most significant similarity between many Italian Westerns and a range of examples from the afterlife of the genre is the sense of the West as a foreign

or alien environment, a place that is understood to be distant or different from an implied norm. In both cases, the generic world of the Western is treated as belonging to another culture – the culture of another country, or of another time. The distinctive locations seen in many Spaghetti Westerns are often described in terms that emphasise their geographical (and implicitly cultural) remoteness. Hoberman makes reference to “landscapes of Martian desolation” (2012: 38) in the films of Sergio Leone and likens some of the settings used in *Da uomo a uomo / Death Rides a Horse* (Giulio Petroni, 1967) to “the middle of the Gobi Desert.” (41) In this way, the American West as portrayed in Italian movies is figuratively framed as a different world. Christopher Frayling’s remark, made when applying Umberto Eco’s structural model of the *Superman* comics to Spaghetti Westerns, that “The superman of the Italian Western does not come from a different planet (rather, from a different culture)...” (2006: 78) seems to imply that the perceived distances involved are comparable, if not strictly equivalent.

The representation of the West as an alien world is most apparent in movies from the early years of the Spaghetti Western boom, after the commercial success of *Per un pugno di dollari / A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, 1964). At this point, the Western had established itself as a currently popular *filone* (generic cycle or strand) within Italian popular cinema. As Austin Fisher notes, “*filoni* relied on rapid repetition and imitation of successful formulae” (2011: 36). The perspective on the world of the Western taken in Leone’s film seems to have been one of the characteristics that was repeated in the movies that initially followed it. Past a certain point – certainly by 1967, “the

peak production year of the Spaghetti Western,” (Frayling 2006: 78) when it was “a firmly established and flourishing *filone*” (Fisher 2011: 45) – it seems as if enough Italian Westerns had been made to have collectively established a familiar generic world of their own. Prior to this point, however, the outsider perspective of *Per un pugno di dollari* was prevalent.

The sense of foreignness and distance attached to the Western milieu in many of the earlier Spaghetti Westerns can be seen in the films’ characteristic approaches to narration and point of view. The settings in which the narratives of these movies take place are typically explored and revealed to us by one or more outsiders, who enter the world of the film from elsewhere. This model is established in *Per un pugno di dollari* and can be seen to a greater or lesser extent in several other key films from the 1964-1966 period: *Per qualche dollaro in più / For a Few Dollars More* (Sergio Leone, 1965), *Una pistola per Ringo / A Pistol for Ringo* (Duccio Tessari, 1965), *Il ritorno di Ringo / The Return of Ringo* (Duccio Tessari, 1965) and *Django* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966).

The notion of an outsider protagonist riding into the story from somewhere else is hardly unfamiliar to Westerns of any period; *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) is a famous example. In a number of the major early Spaghetti Westerns, however, this already recognisable trope is inflected in ways that stress the centrality of the outsider perspective. The degree to which the narrative world of these movies is shown to us through the explorations and

investigations of the outsider figure is particularly emphatic. This is at its most pronounced in *Per un pugno di dollari*, in which Joe (Clint Eastwood) spends much of the early part of the film looking around and assessing the state of affairs in the town of San Miguel, asking questions and familiarising himself with the world into which he has entered. Pausing to drink from the well at the edge of town, Joe observes the plight of Marisol (Marianne Koch) and her family, the film repeatedly cutting back to the image of him looking on, as if to show him taking in the relevant details one by one. Subsequently, Joe will go up to the balcony of the saloon (“Things always look different from higher up.”) and survey the shape and structure of San Miguel while Silvanito (José Calvo) explains about the two powerful families vying for control of the town. We are closely aligned with Joe’s perspective; we explore with him and receive a great deal of information as he does. The world of the Western in *Per un pugno di dollari* is shown to us through Joe.

In *Il ritorno di Ringo*, Ringo / Montgomery Brown (Giuliano Gemma) returns to his home town of Mimbres, having fought on the Union side in the American Civil War. Although Ringo already knows the town, the situation there has changed so much that he spends much of the movie refamiliarising himself with Mimbres and learning about what has happened there. The returning Civil War veteran is another well-established trope within Hollywood Westerns – *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) being perhaps the most widely-cited example – but again we can see this convention being used in a way that particularly emphasises the outsider perspective. Like Joe, Ringo spends a lot of time exploring and looking around – in the streets, in the town’s church

and saloon, and even at his former house where he happens upon his sleeping daughter (Mónica Sugranes) while snooping around in the dark. Ringo has been to these places before (we are shown that he knows his way around his house, even when he cannot see clearly) but the effect is still comparable to that in *Per un pugno di dollari*, with the protagonist's explorations mapping the world of the film for us. The setting and its associated milieu are so central to the Western (consider the name of the genre) that the central characters' relationship to the towns that they enter feels closely connected to each film's broader relationship to the genre itself.

Even in films where we are less overtly or consistently aligned with the perspective of the protagonist, like *Una pistola per Ringo* or *Django*, there is still an emphasis on the outsider figure's deepening relationship with the setting. The titular heroes in these two movies become more and more able to make effective use of the spaces that they occupy. Ringo (Giuliano Gemma), having been without a gun for much of the movie, is finally able to retrieve a hidden weapon from the fireplace of the besieged ranch house towards the end, while Django (Franco Nero) compensates for his injured hands by resting his gun on a cross in a graveyard in the film's final shoot-out. Although the characters remain outsiders, their gradual integration into the world of their respective films is shown by their increased ability to utilise and manipulate elements within it.

The persistence in earlier Spaghetti Westerns of the trope of the outsider discovering or becoming accustomed to the world of the movie (and, by

extension, the world of the Western) can be seen in “*Quién sabe?*” / *A Bullet for the General* (Damiano Damiani, 1966). The film’s narrative, as Fisher (2011: 137) has argued, is based in part around an eventual shift in viewpoint from one character (and the values he embodies) to another – from the American assassin Tate (Lou Castel) to the Mexican bandit and revolutionary Chuncho (Gian Maria Volonté). Nonetheless, even this movie, which ends up very much on the side of the oppressed Mexicans against the imperialist agitators, starts with our perspective aligned with that of the outsider, Tate. Fisher observes that we are encouraged (to begin with) to “accept him as the primary point of contact with the on-screen action.” (2011: 137) However much the film will subsequently depart from Tate and the perspective he represents, the character retains his conventional function as our initial point of entry into the film’s generic world.

If many of the early Spaghetti Westerns present the foreign world of the genre as something to be explored and discovered, the equivalent trope in the afterlife of the genre is that of reconstruction. The Western, in its afterlife, has acquired double connotations of the past – it is associated both with its historical setting and with earlier periods of American filmmaking. There is an established tradition within the genre of paying homage to previous forms and styles – from the clips of John Wayne’s earlier roles in *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976) to the evocation of silent cinema in the opening scene of *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959). A distinctive feature of the afterlife of the Western, however, is the increased sense of separation between the contemporary situation and previous eras in which the genre, as Hollywood

producer Jim Jacks puts it, was “the staple” (quoted in Harris 2004: 7). Contemporary incarnations of the genre often seem compelled to address this increased perception of historical distance.

One characteristic way in which many afterlife Westerns respond to the relative unfamiliarity of the genre and its world to contemporary audiences is to show them as much of that world as possible. A world that belongs to the past is rebuilt for us in extensive, painstaking detail. Richard Combs points to the prevalence of “lengthy landscape studies” in recent Westerns, along with “a pleasingly diverse, intense, sensuous lighting style, which emphasises the minutiae of commodities and the freshness of the carpentry in these frontier towns.” (2009: 46) The camera lingers on period details – props, costumes, sets – as if trying to bring substance and texture back to a forgotten generic universe.

In *Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, 2008), for example, the film’s “classical” style (favouring wide shots, long takes and deep focus) and relatively slow pace give us the opportunity to contemplate a range of elaborate historical details. These details include weaponry (the enormous 8-gauge shotgun belonging to Everett Hitch [Viggo Mortensen]), technology (the telescope used by Virgil Cole [Ed Harris], and later his leg brace) and even facial hair (Everett’s beard and a selection of other fine Victorian moustaches and whiskers throughout the film).

As some of these examples suggest, the emphasis given to such details can actually amplify the alien quality of the world of the Western in these movies. This is especially apparent in films like the remake of *True Grit* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2010). At various points in the movie, the attention devoted to unusual period details produces heightened, surreal effects. One particularly striking example is the scene in the woods, in which Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) and Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) encounter a bearskin-wearing itinerant dentist named Forster (Ed Lee Corbin). Suspecting that they are being followed, Mattie and Cogburn stop and turn around to wait for whoever is on their trail. A tableau-like long shot of the pair sitting on their horses, neither speaking nor moving as the falling snow blows around them, gives the impression of a momentary pause in the action of the movie. Forster is first seen from a distance, where he resembles a bear on horseback, accompanied by the insistent clank of something metallic hanging from his saddle. Cutaways to shots of Mattie and Cogburn looking perplexed confirm this as a strange and unexpected sight. As the dentist approaches, it gradually becomes apparent that he is human – his beard becomes visible under the head of the bearskin, its grey colour is more clearly distinguishable from the brown fur underneath and we are eventually able to see his face. When Forster arrives at the two waiting characters, there is a brief moment of uncertain silence and then a curious and protracted exchange in which Forster introduces himself, explains how he acquired the dead body he is carrying with him (a hanged man that the pair had encountered in a previous scene) and answers Cogburn's enquiry about shelter nearby. The scene's slow pace, gradual revealing of details and its framing as a temporary

interruption to the main characters' journey result in a self-contained episode apparently dedicated to the extended contemplation of Forster's strangeness. The film seems almost to stop to allow us to take in the eccentric details of his speech and appearance. The strangeness of Forster is bound up in a sense of the archaic – he seems both primitive (wearing a bearskin and bartering for a corpse in order to harvest its teeth) and oddly formal (speaking, like many of the characters in the film, in conventionally “old-fashioned” language). The “Bear Man”, as he is called in the film's end credits, gives the impression of coming from a distant and alien past.

The episode with Forster is a rather extreme example, but it illustrates the extent to which the highlighting of idiosyncratic period details in afterlife Westerns can be taken. The effect of this emphasis on historical trappings is rarely as outré as it is in that particular instance – although Combs describes the level of such detail in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik, 2007) as “hallucinatory” (2009: 46) – but the density of the period mise-en-scène in afterlife Westerns often produces a more subtle strangeness. Remaining with *True Grit*, an example of this can be found in the first of two early scenes in the office of Colonel Stonehill (Dakin Matthews), in which Mattie shows her formidable negotiating skills. The period details are not given much in the way of direct emphasis – the spaces behind Mattie and the Colonel are not fully in focus once their negotiations are in progress. However, the objects and textures within these spaces do start to feel quite insistent as the scene goes on. A large part of this effect seems to come from the quantity of material on display. The

Colonel's office, while not cluttered, contains a variety of historical props and fixtures: wooden chairs (six, only two of which are of the same design), desks and cabinets, a pot-bellied stove, as well as many smaller items and desk accessories. All of this remains mostly in the background, but as the scene settles into a steady pattern of shot / reverse shot (reflecting the back and forth of the negotiations) the repetitions come to quietly reassert the presence of all of these objects. The procession of distinctive, carefully rendered historical details in many afterlife Westerns ultimately seems to emphasise the effort that has gone into the reconstruction of (a particular version of) the period. As vivid as the results may sometimes be, the relationship that this suggests to the genre remains one of retrospection and historical remove.

The two tropes discussed above, exploration and reconstruction, are appropriate to the different forms of cultural and generic distance that we see in each of the two moments of transposition: geographical distance in the case of Spaghetti Westerns, temporal distance in the case of the afterlife of the genre. The ways in which the foreign or alien dimension to the Western is managed in each instance, however, are also indicative of another key difference between the two moments. This difference can be thought of in terms of the relative levels of familiarity and immediacy associated with the genre. This may seem incongruous, given the emphasis I have placed on a conception of the Western as an alien world in both contexts, but Spaghetti Westerns demonstrate the extent to which the iconography and milieu of a genre can be understood as both foreign and familiar.

In the historical context he establishes for his discussion of the more overtly political Spaghetti Westerns, Fisher illustrates the popularity and impact of Hollywood Westerns in post-war Italy and throughout Europe. Fisher notes that, by the late 1940s, "The vast landscapes of the American West were... indelibly etched into the popular imagination on both sides of the Atlantic" and that "The myth of the Wild West remained highly attractive throughout Europe during the 1950s" (2011: 25). Even before the commercial explosion of the Spaghetti Western, Stetsons, six-shooters and the like were part of the repertoire of images that Italian audiences expected to see at the movies. After the Second World War, Italy, like a number of other European countries, saw the release of a "backlog of Hollywood films" (Fisher 2011: 16), including Westerns, which would continue to feature among the American films distributed abroad in the decades that followed. By the time that Italian Westerns started to be produced in quantity in the 1960s, the opportunities for domestic audiences to familiarise themselves with the genre had already been extensive. As Frayling remarks, "Your average low-budget Spaghetti played to audiences which went to the pictures several times a week" (2006: xiii). The Italian filmmakers who made Spaghetti Westerns, themselves part of this wider popular film culture, had also in many cases had first-hand experience of Hollywood conventions and practices, having "learned their trade, Hollywood-style, side by side with American directors" (Frayling 2006: 66) in the 1950s, when a number of major US film companies had worked extensively in Rome.

One of the defining features of the afterlife of the Western seems to be the absence of this sort of widespread familiarity with the genre. Over the past few decades, the production of Westerns in Hollywood and elsewhere has been so sporadic that the genre has come to seem rather obscure. This is a matter of cultural capital – most contemporary audiences do not have the experience, and thus the understanding of the Western genre that they once did. This proposition (although I take it to be broadly accurate), involves too many variables and intangibles to demonstrate with any real precision. We can certainly say, however, that many recent Westerns seem to assume a relative lack of familiarity with the genre on their audiences' part. In my own article on the two versions of *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmer Daves, 1957 and James Mangold, 2007), I observed that the approach taken to the conventions of the genre in the 21st century remake of the movie involved “both highlighting iconographic elements, and delimiting their significance” (Falconer 2009: 64). The iconography of the Western – the examples I focused on were “hats, horses and guns” (Falconer 2009: 62) – is emphasised in the 2007 film, but also given very specific and localised meaning. Jim Kitses' remarks, made in the late 1960s, about the accumulated meanings of iconography in Westerns provide a useful point of comparison:

To see a church in a movie – any film but a western – is to see a church; the camera records. By working carefully for it a film-maker can give that church meaning, through visual emphasis, context, repetitions, dialogue. But a church in a western has *a priori* a potential expressiveness rooted in the accretions of the past.” (Kitses 1969: 21)

Putting aside the slightly curious example of the church and the apparent assumption that the Western is the only genre that works in this way, the

contrast is still telling. The handling of Western iconography in the 2007 *3:10 to Yuma* – for example, the gun belonging to outlaw Ben Wade (Russell Crowe) which is carefully established as “unique and distinctive”, with suggestions of supernatural properties (Falconer 2009: 63) – seems much closer to that in Kitzes’ “any film but a western”, with the meaning of key elements achieved by “working carefully for it”, rather than by building on existing associations. The film’s approach seems to be based on the assumption that these associations will not be strong or consistent enough to work for its audience.

A lack of familiarity with the genre, real or perceived, was not a problem that the Spaghetti Western faced. The Western may have been foreign to Italy, but its profile and presence within Italian popular culture were well established. Returning to the tropes of exploration and reconstruction, a significant difference, relating to relative levels of apparent familiarity, can be seen in the types of character often associated with each activity.

One of the recurring ways in which the world of the Western is reconstructed in works from the afterlife of the genre is through retrospective narration. In the Coen brothers’ *True Grit*, the story is framed as the recollections of Mattie Ross later in life (Elizabeth Marvel). Mattie is a relatively rare female example – the narrating figure is more often male, as in two movies from 2007: *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen) and *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson). Neither movie is a Western per se, but both reflect aspects of the genre’s afterlife in a number of ways, some of which are surprisingly similar.

Each film establishes its connection to the Western genre in its opening sequence. Both openings include a darkened Western landscape and retrospective voiceover narration from an older man – Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) in *No Country for Old Men* and the Caretaker (Sam Elliott) in *Ghost Rider*.

The use of the older man's introductory narration suggests a specific perspective on the genre. In both movies, the Western comes to us as if from a distance. Our access to the genre is mediated, associated with memory rather than with present experience. The choice of showing us the Western landscape at night or in the early morning adds to the sense of remoteness and separation. In full daylight, the spaces we see might seem more open, more amenable to being traversed and explored. Our impression of these spaces might involve more of the characteristic associations of landscape in the genre – of freedom and hardship, danger and possibility. Instead, the Western environment as we first see it in both movies seems mysterious and distant.

That two such disparate films – an Oscar-winning adaptation of a Cormac McCarthy novel and a Marvel superhero movie starring Nicholas Cage – should share such specific features suggests something about the contemporary status of the Western. The implication seems to be that the genre needs to be retrieved for us from the obscurity of the past by an individual more closely connected to its world than we are assumed to be. The association of the Western with older men has its own history within the

genre, for example in films like *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958) and *Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, 1962) which connect the aging of their protagonists (played by established Western stars) to the passing of the Old West itself. This association, however, is extended in *No Country for Old Men* and *Ghost Rider*, where the West itself is presented as more distant, and the older men are offered as points of partial, retrospective access.

These older narrating figures can be contrasted with the often strikingly youthful protagonists that we can see exploring the world of the Western in a number of the Spaghetis mentioned above, played by young stars such as Clint Eastwood, Giuliano Gemma and Franco Nero. In these examples, our access to the genre is still in some sense mediated, but through a figure that suggests more of a connection to the here and now. The Western itself, as a quintessential Hollywood genre, had its own associations with youth and the contemporary in 1960s Italy – in the post-war period, as Fisher points out, “Americana became a touchstone for European youth culture” (2011: 22). In Europe during the era of the Spaghetti Western, the Western still felt much more like something that a young man could gain access to and inhabit.

As I have already suggested, the relationship of the Italian Western to its Hollywood predecessors is one of both familiarity and distance. In the most interesting and successful Spaghetti Westerns, it is the balance between these elements that produces such a fascinating engagement with the genre. The Western is familiar enough for its conventional generic language to be used clearly and effectively, but the lack of investment in some of the cultural

assumptions and narratives that surround the genre provides considerable scope for novelty and invention (as well as for more extensive political and ideological reworkings).

Spaghetti Westerns often use the iconography of the genre in an engagingly casual and offhand way. An entertaining example of this is the abandoned covered wagon by the riverside in *Un fiume di dollari / The Hills Run Red* (Carlo Lizzani, 1966), on and around which Jerry Brewster (Thomas Hunter) fights off some of the villain's henchmen. The primary purpose of the wagon is to add another dimension to the staging of the fight (and to provide the hero with a selection of hard objects and surfaces to hit his opponents with). We are offered no explanation why the wagon might be there – it is simply an object that could plausibly be found in this generic environment. Its presence is established in the previous scene, in which Brewster meets his long-lost son (Loris Loddi), but its introduction is given no significant emphasis. Indeed, once the wagon has been used as the basis for a few athletic stunts and moments of comic violence, it recedes from the scene and the final stages of the fight take place splashing around in the river. The wagon's function as part of an effective, comically inflected action scene depends on its simultaneous familiarity and disposability as an iconographic object – its presence needs to be able to be readily accepted without drawing too much specific attention. The scene would be almost unthinkable in an afterlife Western – either the presence of the wagon would require too much explanation and context, or the lack of such explanation and context would be treated emphatically, as a reflection of the strangeness of the generic world.

The capacity of Spaghetti Westerns to employ the iconography of the genre in an almost throwaway fashion also produced some sharp and economical storytelling. This can be seen in the series of short scenes in *Faccia a faccia / Face to Face* (Sergio Sollima, 1967) in which the band of outlaws known as the Wild Gang gets back together. Each scene introduces a new gang member by evoking a familiar character type: the horse thief, the guard riding shotgun on the mail coach and finally the post-Civil War Southerner. Each type is established via clear, simple actions and images – Vance the horse thief (Nello Pazzafini), for example, is shown watching a group of horses and then lassoing one. The film moves from type to type with speed and confidence, using the language of the genre to deliver narrative information efficiently.

The use of generic tropes and motifs in the Spaghetti Western can also, of course, go a long way beyond the strictly functional. In a film like *Il grande silenzio / The Great Silence* (Sergio Corbucci, 1968), the sustained engagement with the conventions surrounding violence in the genre, its moral and legal justifications and the issues that arise out of it – honour, justice, revenge, cruelty, individualism, legalism – achieves a level of complexity comparable that of some of the best Hollywood Westerns. The film juxtaposes the approaches to violence taken by the hero Silence (Jean-Louis Trintignant), the villain Tigrero (Klaus Kinski) and the sympathetic but ineffectual bureaucrat Sheriff Gideon Burnett (Frank Wolff) in ways that allow them to reflect aspects of one another without becoming overly schematic.

Silence's insistence on drawing second, in the honourable tradition of the Western gunfighter, is framed as both a mark of heroic distinction and a pretext for deadly violence ("Maybe it's a good way to kill," remarks a lawman in an early scene). The contrast with the sadistic and self-satisfied Tigrero emphasises both the nobility of Silence's code and its obvious limitations. Tigrero, too, is happy to play by Silence's rules when it suits him, to deny Silence the opportunity of goading him into a duel or to justify the killing of Regina (Marisa Merlini) – "You saw she shot first."

The film maintains its sense of complexity in Silence's death, which is presented both as a kind of apotheosis (Silence falls in slow-motion, with an almost Christ-like trickle of blood from the top of his head) and as a futile gesture, which fails to prevent the massacre of the unarmed, starving outlaws at the hands of Tigrero and his fellow bounty hunters. Silence's death recalls Robert Warshow's remarks on the Western hero: that "the image the Westerner seeks to maintain can be presented as clearly in defeat as in victory" (1954: 111) and that "the Westerner comes into the field of serious art only when his moral code, without ceasing to be compelling, is seen also to be imperfect." (112) The pertinence of Warshow's observations, made over a decade earlier in reference to Hollywood Westerns, reflects the film's complex engagement with established traditions within the genre.

The depth and diversity of Italian incarnations of the Western, however, have not always been recognised. As Fisher notes, when Spaghetti Westerns were exported to the US, they were often regarded by critics as interchangeable, as

“not only a sadistic, but a homogeneous, mass of low-budget trash.” (2011: 176) This lack of differentiation bears an interesting resemblance to the situation that can be observed in the afterlife of the Western genre. In recent Westerns and Western hybrids, we frequently see tropes, images and situations from many different styles and periods brought together. This often takes the form of wide-ranging episodic narratives, consisting of sections reminiscent of different Westerns or types of Western. I noted this tendency in my discussion of the 2007 *3:10 to Yuma*, both in relation to that film and to *Appaloosa*, referring in the latter case to “the episodic sprawl of its plot incorporating situations recalling Westerns from *Rio Bravo* to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.” (Falconer 2009, 66) In these and other examples, very different strands and aspects of the genre are treated, in their revived incarnations, as historically and aesthetically equivalent. The history of the Western is condensed and flattened – the genre as a whole is treated as belonging to a generalised past, formed out of those tropes from different periods that are still remembered.

As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, this fragmentary retrospective definition of the genre includes aspects of the Spaghetti Western. More academic discourses still tend to contrast Italian Westerns with “classical” examples of the genre, placing them in what William McClain, writing about the critical reception of Leone’s movies, refers to as “the now sturdy family tree of post-studio revisionist Westerns” (2010: 52). In the afterlife of the Western, however, Spaghetthis have been incorporated into the disparate assemblage of elements that are understood to be the genre’s inheritance.

Indeed, a number of the most prominent Westerns in popular memory are now Spaghetthis, and these movies have come to play an increasingly central role in how the genre is defined. Spaghetti Westerns are often the main point of reference in broader allusions to the genre in areas such as journalism. A *Variety* article from 2009 about negotiations between the major US television networks and their advertisers likened the situation to a Western “standoff”, but specifically to “the last 20 minutes of a spaghetti Western.” (Littleton 2009: 3) In a critical review in praise of the Australian movie *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), which draws heavily on the Western, Philip Cenere states that the movie “fiercely resists the trappings of its genre.” (2006: 40). Elaborating on this point, Cenere specifies that “*The Proposition* successfully side-steps the spaghetti-western clichés made famous by Sergio Leone.” (2006: 40) To indicate the centrality of the Spaghetti Western to the frame of reference in these examples, the titles of the two articles discussed here are ‘Fistful of Tension’ and ‘The Good, the Bad and *The Proposition*’.

Across a range of contemporary popular culture, elements from or reminiscent of Italian Westerns are often used as shorthand for the Western as a whole. In the animated film *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011), the mythical Spirit of the West, the embodiment of all things Western, is presented as a Clint Eastwood-like figure, dressed like the characters he played in the *Dollars* trilogy. The tendency for the Spaghetti Western to stand in for the whole genre can even be seen in recent British television. The CGI animated ident (directed by Juan Jesus Garcia) used for films shown on ITV4 between 2007

and 2013 featured the channel's logo, a silver digit "4", in situations evoking movie genres, including the Western. The individual sections were sometimes used on their own as shorter idents. The Western section featured swinging batwing doors, a low looming camera angle reminiscent of Leone and a tiny snatch of Morricone-esque music (little more than rattling percussion and an ominously tolling bell). The whole ident is 30 seconds long, and the Western section of it takes up little more than 5. The use of Spaghetti Western elements suggests that these are seen as the aspects of the Western genre most likely to be recognised in such a short space of time. Similarly, in an episode of competitive cooking show *The Great British Menu* (BBC, 2006-present), a chef serving a Western-themed main course provided the judges with Eastwood-style ponchos to wear while eating the dish.

As the above examples suggest, the Spaghetti Western elements that continue to appear in contemporary popular culture predominantly consist of a few flourishes and motifs associated with the films of Sergio Leone. Fisher refers to "the phenomenal achievements of Sergio Leone in the international marketplace" (2011: 167) which led to "the generic dominance of Leone" (178) in perceptions of Italian Westerns, especially in the US and the UK. If the Spaghetti Western is now often used to represent the entire Western genre, Leone frequently seems to fulfil the same function for the Spaghetti Western itself.

We may lament the extent to which a rich and varied body of films has been reduced in popular memory to a scattering of recognisable motifs from a

couple of specific examples. In the afterlife of the Western, it would appear that Spaghetti Westerns are subject to the same fragmentation and condensation as other versions and periods of the genre. Despite these shared conditions, however, the Spaghetti seems to remain one of the more prominent and widely-recognised forms of the Western. As Frayling noted in the early part of this century, “Italian Westerns are probably more fashionable worldwide in 2005 than their American counterparts” (2006: ix). This continuing situation may be partly because of the relative freshness of Italian Westerns in popular memory – they still number among the last Westerns to enjoy large-scale mainstream success. Perhaps, though, the emphasis on distinctiveness, immediacy and impact that we often see in Spaghetti Westerns has also made them better equipped to endure the latter-day conditions of the genre. The strategies employed in Italian Westerns to ensure that transposed generic elements still have meaning and power in a foreign cultural context may continue to serve them well in a subsequent moment of transposition.

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